Behind the Veil in Afghanistan

by Nancy Hatch Dupree

Every weekday morning in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, scores of women on their way to work stream out of the old city, the middle-class housing developments, and the mud-walled villages on the outskirts. Teachers, university professors, engineers, doctors, nurses, policewomen, factory workers, saleswomen, social workers, actresses, and a number of other working women, they are dressed in the latest fashions. This year it is pants suits and jeans; a few years ago mini-skirts and knee-high boots were in.

Yet foreign observers report that one can wander for hours in the streets of Kabul without seeing the face of a single woman. They are fascinated by the *chadri*, a pleated garment of pastel hues that envelops a woman from head to toe, except for a square of open-work embroidery over the eyes to provide limited vision. Citing the chadri as a symbol, these foreigners describe Afghan women as among the least liberated on earth.

This conclusion is an interesting example of cultural bias. What is present and ignored is a noteworthy sign of liberation. What is present and observed is misinterpreted.

The chadri is a garment traditionally worn in urban areas by women from orthodox Muslim families—families that have held conservative attitudes regarding the role of women in society. There was a time when women from such homes



Though common in Kabul, the traditional chadri is not worn by all Afghan women.

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would never venture beyond their doors except for occasional social functions, and then only in the company of a male escort. Even the daily shopping was done by men or young children.

In recent years, however, the chadri has become increasingly visible in all parts of Kabul. One often sees chadri-clad women, alone or in small groups, shopping freely in the crowded bazaars or on their way to visit friends. Some are urban women, enjoying a new, if still limited, freedom. Others are rural women, who ordinarily do not wear the chadri in their villages, but adopt it when they come to the city as a mark of sophistication. Until just a few years ago, Afghan village women would have remained behind when the men went to the city, but now, permitted to travel for the first time, they too are experiencing the wider horizons offered by going about chadri-clad in the city streets.

Clothes do not make the man—or woman—in Afghanistan, but historically they have been regarded as a barometer of the wearer's attitudes toward modernity. Over the last hundred years, in fact, Afghan kings have equated Western dress with progressiveness and deliberately fostered its adoption, belittling those who refused to wear it, issuing decrees that it be worn, and even levying fines to bully both men and women into accepting Western styles.

Nineteenth century expansionist ambitions of the Russians in central Asia and the British in India twice brought British armies onto Afghan soil, in 1839–42 and 1878–80. Neither incursion resulted in political ties or lasting cultural influences, but at the end of the second incursion, Amir Abdur Rahman (1880–1901) came to the throne of Kabul determined to safeguard the integrity of Afghanistan by stringently regulating the introduction of external influences.

At the same time, he was equally committed to creating an outward-looking, progressive attitude among his people so that the nation might develop and gain the respect of its contentious neighbors—a necessary condition for keeping Afghanistan independent.

After eleven years of political exile in central Asia and a short visit to British India in 1885, the Amir was convinced that Western dress for men would promote the progressive outlook he desired. In his autobiography he explains his reasons for introducing new dress codes:

In former times all the people of Afghanistan from the King downwards . . . used to wear tremendously big trousers, and sleeves yards wide, so that for one pair of trousers fifteen yards of white calico were required. This was a great piece of extravagance; it was also very hideous . . . this stupid fashion made the people lazy and unable to move without dragging along yards and yards of stuff hanging behind them. To put an end to this I employed Indian tailors . . . I placed hundreds of tailors under their instruction . . . I gave orders that all people who appeared at their duties wearing these ugly trousers should forfeit six months pay.

The Amir was chary of allowing alien influences to penetrate the country, and foreigners entered only upon his express invitation. One so privileged was a Mr. Walter, a British tailor, who came to instruct his budding counterparts in Afghanistan. Mr. Walter also wrote a tailoring manual, complete with cutting patterns, which was translated and published in Kabul in 1892–93. The trends for men's fashions were thereby unalterably set, although the Amir did allow some oriental fancifulness. Tunics could be cut from colorful velvets and elaborately embroidered in gold, but trousers were strictly English, as were the boots made in a factory established in 1892 by a Mr. Thornton, another Englishman. Embroidered slippers with turned-up toes became definitely unfashionable at court.

Afghanistan was never colonized, but just as Indian civil servants adopted the dress of their British colonial rulers, so Afghans desiring prestige and position at court copied *their* ruler's standards of fashion.



Afghan tennis party (1911) followed the sport's introduction at court by the Amir.

For the women of his harem, on the other hand, the Amir prescribed the quality of their costumes but not the style. The women were allowed the voluminous trousers that were denied men; they wore their hair braided, with sheer white scarves as their only headdress. But



Leaders of the Western-influenced elite. Crown Prince Amanullah (center) and Sardar Enayatullah (right) pose with court ladies wearing styles of 1910.

The old photographs illustrated in this article were selected from the Khalilullah Enayat Seraj Collection of Antique Photographs, most of which were taken by Khalilullah, the eldest son of Sardar Enayatullah.

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gradually they, too, began to experiment with Western styles.

Amir Abdur Rahman had a habit of deporting his political opponents and their families to British India, Turkey, and the Middle East. This too had a dramatic effect on the Westernization of Afghan culture.

Two brothers, Sardars Mohammad Asef and Mohammad Yusuf, who had been exiled to India in 1880 when they were in their twenties, were recalled around 1900 with their numerous Indian-born, thoroughly Westernized, teen-age children. Twenty years of exile had impressed them with the trappings and grandeur of the imperial life-style, and they had little understanding of the ways of life in their homeland.



KES 288 Date: 1919

Amir Habibullah in English hunting clothes displays a bag of wild goat.

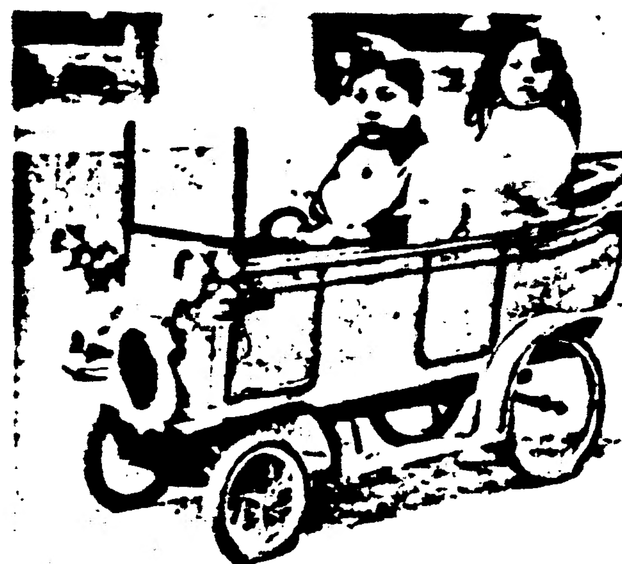
After their return to Afghanistan, however, this family gained high favor with the Crown Prince, Habibullah. When Habibullah succeeded to the throne in 1901 following the death of Amir Abdur Rahman, the brothers were honored with the title of *Musahiban* (Companions), and their influence became even more powerful. The new Amir was fascinated with imported luxuries and gadgetry, and the Musahiban encouraged this taste.

Other exiles soon flocked to Kabul after Amir Habibullah declared a general amnesty in 1903. One of them, Mahmud Beg Tarzi, had been 17 years old when he followed his father into exile in 1881 and had spent most of the intervening years in Syria. He had traveled widely, read extensively in European literature, and participated in the intellectual excitement of the Young Turk movement that eventually shaped modern Turkey. After returning to Afghanistan, Mahmud Tarzi came to be an adviser to kings and an ardent spokesman for reform.

In *Seraj ul-Akhbar*, the newspaper he founded in 1911 and edited until the end of 1918, he called upon Muslims throughout the world to develop progressive attitudes so that they might better resist the dangers of encroaching colonialism. He chastised his tradition-bound countrymen for their unwillingness to countenance new ideas, and he called upon women to take an active part in development processes—an idea highly disturbing to conservative elements inside Afghanistan.

Although *Seraj ul-Akhbar* was read far beyond the borders of Afghanistan (even as far as Australia!), outsiders of this time described the country as a "hermit nation," a "forbidden land," and a place "both mysterious and seductive."

Entrance for foreigners still depended on the pleasure of one man, the Amir, and not many were invited. Had they been given the opportunity to glance inside the homes of Kabul's ruling elite, however, they would have been amazed at the rapid changes taking place. They would, no doubt, have felt disturbingly at home in this land they considered so insulated from foreign influence.



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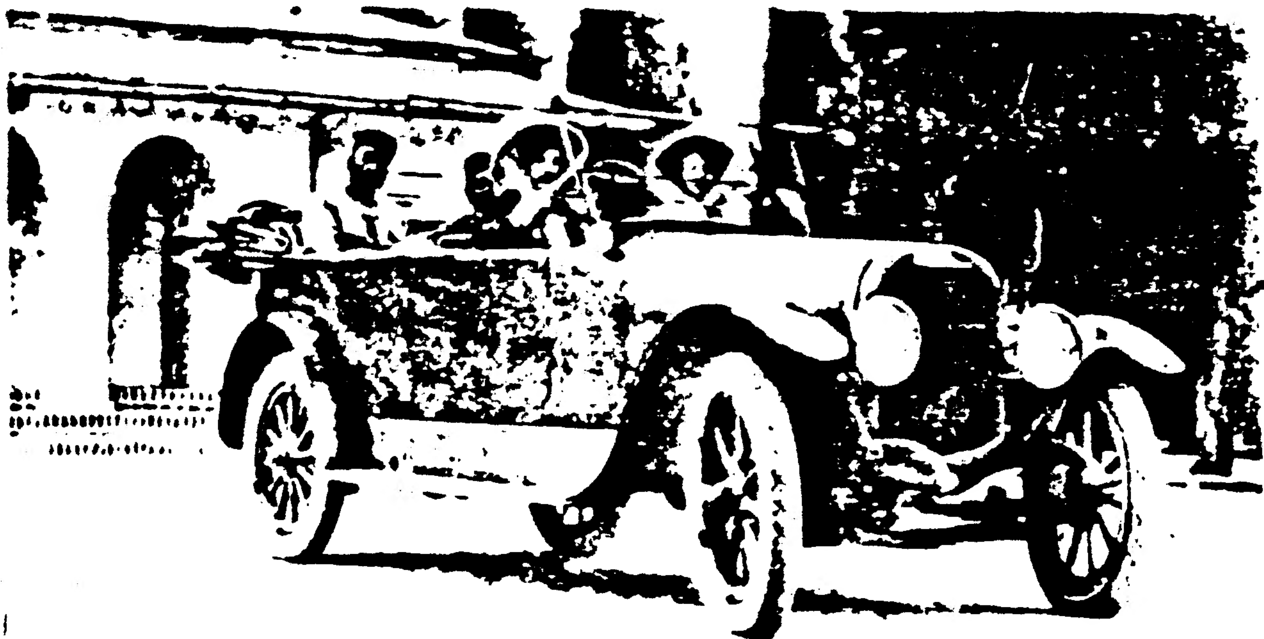
The children of Sardar Enayatullah enjoy Western toys, as well as clothes (1918).

Amir Habibullah was a prolific builder of palaces in the colonial style of British India. The interiors were sumptuously finished with imported wallpaper on which framed prints and all manner of bric-a-brac were scattered in cluttered profusion. Wood panelling, wainscoting, and ornately carved woodwork abounded. Immense crystal chandeliers, carried to Kabul on the backs of elephants, hung from delicately embossed metal ceilings above massive carved furniture laden with objets d'art.

In matters of dress, Amir Habibullah's tastes were similarly Victorian or even Edwardian. His regulation court costume for men consisted of a black cloth coat, vest, trousers, white shirt, and black tie, all English-cut to a prescribed pattern. Mahmud Tarzi was partial to bow ties and white buckskin shoes. The Amir himself generally preferred the tweeds and sports clothes typical of an English country gentleman, for he was passionately devoted to the hunt, as well as to golf and tennis, which were introduced during his reign.

It was women, however, who were making the most astounding changes. In countries under Christian colonial administration, women proudly kept to their national dress as a visible measure of cultural independence. But in Afghanistan, which was never colonized, Western clothing continued to be regarded as a mark of distinction indicative of broader, more worldly attitudes.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the new trends were set largely by Mahmud Tarzi's daughters, two of whom were married to sons of Amir Habibullah.



Veiled only by dusters, the future Queen Soraya and Huriya Tarzi go driving.

Their prominent position at court and their enthusiasm for European fashions influenced the entire court-oriented elite, including the Amir's large harem.

In 1909 Sardar Enayatullah, eldest son of the Amir, who was well-known for his sartorial elegance, married Khayriya Tarzi. Following her lead, young ladies began to wear dresses with nipped-in waists, tucked yokes, frilled stand-up collars, and leg-of-mutton sleeves. Hats perched high on pompadours were piled with plumes, flowers, and ribbons.

With the adoption of Western dress came even more significant changes of outlook. Sardar Enayatullah, for instance, refused to take a second wife in spite of the fact that his father, the Amir, who had four lawfully-wedded wives and untold consorts, repeatedly urged him to do so. Women from elite families also began to feel that women should be accorded an equal and meaningful position in society and be given an education that would prepare them to govern their own affairs.

The progressive tastes and attitudes affecting these ruling elites were naturally imparted to their offspring. From the time they were born, children were dressed exclusively in Western clothing. Their playthings were imported or made in Kabul on Western models. Secular education was considered imperative: Boys were sent to the first secular school, founded by the Amir in 1904, and girls were tutored at home.

Just one generation after Amir Abdur Rahman initiated his programs of measured reform, the urban, court-oriented elite was so strongly Westernized that the new generation came to look upon traditional dress and conservative attitudes with scorn.

When Amir Habibullah's third son, Amanullah, succeeded to the throne in 1919 following his father's assassination by political opponents, the pace of change grew even more rapid. Amir Amanullah immediately bombarded the nation with social, economic, and political reforms designed to bring about instant modernization. There was nothing measured about his approach, and his headlong dash disturbed even his most reform-minded adviser, Mahmud Tarzi.

To emphasize the new direction, the Amir determined to build a new capital some six miles south of Kabul, and he invited engineers and architects from Germany, France, Italy, and Turkey to participate in the project. In addition, the little hill town of Paghman, 18 miles above Kabul, was rapidly transformed into a Continental-style resort, replete with public gardens studded with statu-



This 1927 flapper is Raziya, sister of Amir Amanullah, after her marriage.

ettes and fountains. Bands played as the elite gathered for afternoon tea at the cafe, or promenaded along walks lined with flower beds. Amir Amanullah was clearly attracted by Europe, rather than by British India, and in 1923 he changed his title to King in order to identify himself more closely with his European colleagues.

Amanullah's wife, Queen Soraya, daughter of Mahmud Tarzi and younger



A member of the progressive Tarzi family, Huriya, wears evening dress (1915).

The government brought in by the civil war held Kabul for barely nine months before the city was wrested from it by five sons of Sardar Mohammad Yusuf, the younger Musahiban brother during Amir Habibullah's reign. One of the Sardar's sons became King Mohammad Nadir.

The rule of King Nadir (1929-33) was far more conservative than that of King Amanullah, but the overall direction of policy remained the same. The Musahiban brothers, after all, had been born in exile and also sought outward-looking goals for the nation. The pace of progress, however, was slower and more measured.

Women were returned to seclusion and the chadri. But within their confinement they were encouraged to develop their abilities. More and more girls attended schools wearing Western uniforms and dresses under their chadri. Western dress continued to distinguish the outward-oriented from the traditionally-oriented.

In 1959, therefore, when the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud (a nephew of King Nadir) announced its support of the voluntary shedding of the chadri, scores of women emerged fully prepared to take up an active place in society. The trend continued when the kingdom became a republic and Mohammad Daoud its president in 1973. Since Daoud's recent assasination, there is no evidence that the new government of Nur Mohammad Taraki plans to reverse the trend.

Theoretically, at least, Islam proclaims the equality of all individuals before Allah and demands full social justice without regard to race or sex. And the 1977 Constitution of the Republic of Afghanistan guarantees women full equal rights. The enforced seclusion and the veil that we associate with Islam were actually adopted by Arab Muslims hundreds of years after Muhammad, following their conquest of the Christian Byzantine Empire and the Zoroastrian Sasanian (Persian) Empire.

Like other modernists in the Muslim world, Afghanistan's urban, educated, liberated women believe that the fundamental beliefs of Islam have been perverted by discriminatory restrictions on women. Yet they are also well aware that in Afghan culture women symbolize the honor of the family, the tribe, and the nation, a belief which traditionally has meant that ideal female behavior was passive, modest, and obedient.

In seeking to realize fully the constitutional rights guaranteed them, these women do not attack Islam, nor do they attempt to destroy the value system of their society. Rather, they seek an evolution favorable to women within Islam and within the uniqueness of Afghan culture. They ask for a redefinition of what constitutes honorable behavior on the modern scene.

Many have succeeded in their chosen careers because they have tempered their new freedoms with the basic ideals of their culture, demonstrating that professionalism, even in politics, can be enhanced by a dignified modesty.

Following their example, an increasing number of women each year enter the mainstream of Afghan life, particularly in the urban areas. ■



Christa Armstrong Photo Researchers

Since the 1959 decree permitting the shedding of the chadri, increasing numbers of women, like these medical students, attend Kabul University.



Christa Armstrong Photo Researchers

Women have recently joined men in the electricity lab at Kabul University.

Further Reading

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The latest in golfwear (1918) is sported by Sardar Enayatullah as he sinks a putt.

ster of the fashion-conscious Khayriya, as an equally enthusiastic reformer. Not urprisingly, therefore, many of the new forms dealt with the emancipation of omen. The first school for girls opened 1921 under the Queen's patronage and e directorship of her mother, Rasmiya, yrian wife of Mahmud Tarzi. The teach- ig staff included women from France, ermany, and Turkey. Women were also ncouraged, but not ordered, to shed the hadri so that they might better take up tivities outside the home. Their occupa- ons included teaching, nursing at the newly established women's hospital, and editing both the first periodical devoted to women and the four-page weekly newspaper published for children.

Again, both the King and the Queen considered dress of prime importance in promoting progressive attitudes. Girls attending school, whose numbers totalled 700 by 1927, wore uniforms of Western style. Western clothing was mandatory in the new capital, in Paghman, and in certain sections of Kabul; and the King levied fines on those who disregarded his directives.

Nevertheless, many men, even among those holding prominent positions at court, dared to incur the King's displeasure by refusing to allow their wives to shed the chadri and put on Western dress. For these wives, and for other women who themselves refused to adopt Western styles, the new dress codes were inhibiting. For the more progressive women, however, the styles then in vogue in Europe symbolized the freedom they sought. Hemlines rose, sleeves almost disappeared, and relaxed sports clothes were worn with bobbed hairstyles.

In 1928 the King and Queen made a seven-month tour of Europe during which the Queen, her sister Huriya, and the King's young sister Nur us-Seraj appeared at public functions in décolleté gowns without veils. On their return, the Queen rode into Kabul in an open car wearing a short diaphanous voile veil tacked to the brim of her stylish cloche hat. A month later women from the royal family appeared in similar veils in the public gardens of Paghman. The young and the courageous favored pastel shades; the less courageous selected darker shades. Whatever their color, the veils were provocative and the raised hemlines decidedly shocking.

At this time, King Amanullah issued black frock-coated suits, felt fedoras, and English boots to the 700 delegates summoned to a Great Parliamentary Council at Paghman, and commanded that they don these dreary Western garments in place of their colorful robes and turbans.

Conservative elements had long chafed at the King's reforms, but these fashion dictates proved to be the last straw. Three months after the Great Council met in August 1928, the first of several tribal uprisings occurred. The leaders demanded that insistence on Western dress be dropped entirely and bobbed hair for women be forbidden. Most importantly they demanded that the King divorce Queen Soraya because of her shameless behavior and expel the entire Tarzi family from Afghanistan. To the tribal chiefs the Tarzi family symbolized the drastic transformations endangering traditional Afghan culture.

No accommodation could be made, and by May 1929 King Amanullah and Queen Soraya, together with a majority of the royal family, had been forced into exile. Their failure to appreciate traditional values, their blithe ignorance of Afghan realities, and their too precipitous, uncompromising pursuit of Westernized goals had thoroughly alienated those they sought to rule.

These voile veils, so shocking to Afghan eyes, are worn by court ladies in 1928.

KES 1020



Among the nomads of Afghanistan, women rarely wear the urban chadri.



Paolo Koch Photo Researchers